

Applied Ethics for Future Managers

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Abstract: Teaching ethics to future managers is increasingly desirable. The ethical aspects of professions fundamentally affect people's lives. Currently, ethics is commonly considered in various fields of human activities, mainly due to the fact that the unprecedented development of new technologies posing new challenges, e.g., artificial intelligence (AI), or medical devices. Future managers should be taught business ethics as the new technologies are produced by companies and multistakeholder collaboration, a trend in current applied ethics, necessarily includes managers of companies producing these technologies. In this study, we ask the following questions: What are the shortcomings of our approach to teaching applied ethics? What should we change in the future to prepare our students well for their managerial work? In future, we shall focus much more on the corporate perspective of business ethics and continue in our practice of discussing examples of ethical problem solving that include conflicts between various ethical principles. The overall aim is to awaken and deepen future managers' ethical awareness.

Keywords: professional ethics; code of ethics; education

JEL Classification: M14; M10

1. Introduction

Since the 1990s, ethics and professional ethics have become increasingly important in the Czech Republic as a result of significant social changes. Direct evidence of this is the emergence of professional codes of ethics and the exploration of the ethical aspects of professions that fundamentally affect people's lives. Theoretical and practical outcomes can be found particularly in the fields of medicine, pharmacy, business and education. Codes of ethics are developed and refined in the light of social and technological developments and, over time, ethics committees are established to analyse and evaluate the suggestions of users of the results and services of individual professions in specific workplaces in relation to specific people and activities.

The gradual cultivation of not only the business environment also requires an increase in the importance of responsibility and competence in all job positions. It can be stated that the degree of responsibility and competence is linked to the place in the corporate, institutional and organisational hierarchy.

Currently, ethics is commonly considered in various fields of human activities. It is mainly due to the fact that the unprecedented development of new technologies poses new challenges and creates previously unthinkable issues. The application and utilisation of new technologies is particularly palpable in medicine. The use of medical devices, including

personal health monitoring technologies, poses ethical problems like patients' privacy, social isolation, or autonomy (see Mittelstadst, 2014). Other authors (e.g., Ikonen & Kaasinen, 2008) also name privacy, autonomy as ethical issues when discussing ambient-assisted living applied in health care. In the same vein, Sharkey and Sharkey (2012) see similar problem areas (loss of privacy, loss of personal liberty) in the use of robots in elderly care.

There is also a widespread discussion on the ethics of artificial intelligence. For instance, Solomonides et al. (2022) proposes machine ethics, seeking to apply ethical considerations into the design of AI (i.e., artificial intelligence) systems. Javed et al. (2022), who analysed 166 syllabi of various AI ethics courses, maintain that it has long been known that ethics should be taught to both tech professionals and AI practitioners in order to raise their ethical awareness and develop their skills for implementing ethical guidelines. Authors like Shih et al. (2021), Solomonides et al. (2022), Stenseke (2022), Hu et al. (2022), Leimanis and Palkova (2021) agree that multistakeholder collaboration is inevitable as it helps widen and enrich differing and partial views of individual stakeholders.

That said, future managers should also be taught applied ethics. First, all the above-mentioned technologies, be it medical devices, ambient-assisted living, robots, or artificial intelligence, are produced by various companies, not by healthcare workers. Second, the aforementioned multistakeholder collaboration necessarily includes managers of companies producing the technologies.

In a previous study (Kacetl & Semrádová, 2019), we claimed they favoured problem-based and reflective approach to teaching professional ethics. In the same vein, Hummel et al. (2018) argue that students should be encouraged to practise solving ethical problems themselves rather than learning ready-made expert solutions.

In the present study, we seek to determine the extent to which we are succeeding in preparing students for the future need to address ethical issues in their companies in light of current knowledge and approaches to applied ethics. The fundamental research questions we ask are: 1) What are the shortcomings of our approach to teaching applied ethics? 2) What should we change in the future to prepare our students well for their managerial work?

2. Methodology

At the Faculty of Informatics and Management (FIM), University of Hradec Králové (UHK), students of managerial study programmes can frequent a course of Business Ethics. The syllabus of Business Ethics (BE) covers several key areas, including basic concepts (ethics, morality, values, norms, codes of conduct), professional ethics (in particular ethics in medicine and ethics in education), business ethics and its history, main topics and problems, ethical decision-making in business, business ethics and its development in the Czech Republic since the 1990s, the creation and contents of codes of conduct, ethics relevant in human resources, common issues like discrimination, sacking, ethics of business communication, advertising and marketing ethics, corporate responsibility, and fair trade.

Teaching takes place over the course of one semester. In the full-time form, students attend one ninety-minute session per week. In the combined form, distance learners have twelve 45-minute lessons per semester with self-study support. In particular, we use methods of creating

and analysing mind maps, word clouds, group discussions, working with text, presentations and moderated debate. Work in the seminar results in the production of essays or reflections.

This research was based on essays written by students at the end of the Business Ethics course at FIM UHK. The students were asked to choose a significant topic dealing with some aspect(s) of business ethics. They were asked to think about this topic with respect to the course content and elaborate it into an essay or reflection on the topic.

The authors applied text analysis to their students' essays/reflections. The collected essays were thoroughly studied by BE teachers who looked for relevant ideas in the submitted essays/reflections. These ideas were then ranked based on the frequency of their occurrence in the students' essays/reflections. The results of this analysis were then evaluated in terms of their relevance to current requirements for teaching ethics.

3. Results Teaching Business Ethics at FIM

In the period 2020-2022, FIM students submitted 127 relevant written papers/essays (82 by full-time students and 45 by distance learners). Their choice of essay topics (see Table 1) was based on the syllabus and on debates and discussions in seminars.

Table 1. The most frequent topics of students' essays

Topic	No. of essays by full-time students	No. of essays by distance students
Determinants affecting job satisfaction	48	36
Ethical aspects of communication in workplace relationships	18	2
Code of ethics	6	2
Inappropriate behaviour in the workplace	5	2
Fair Trade	3	2
Ethics of persuasion	2	1

Learners could also formulate their own topic. Some of the most frequently analysed topics include, for example, determinants of job satisfaction, ethical aspects of communication in workplace relationships, codes of conduct, inappropriate behaviour in the workplace, fair trade, and ethics of persuasion.

Students are most interested in issues related to employment, professional performance and workplace relationships. Based on frequency analysis (see Table 2), the most common themes have to do with the determinants of job satisfaction: fair financial remuneration, adequate job placement, work environment, and relationships with colleagues/co-workers.

Students seem to prefer to view ethical issues from a personal perspective or from the perspective of the individual and his/her position in the workplace. From the students' point of view, the personal interest of the employee seems to be essential, which also applies to negative influences. Among the latter, the students include maximalist demands of the employer, unreasonable workload, stressful environment, constant control of employees, harassment, bullying and ageism.

Table 2. Frequency analysis of the most often mentioned ethical motifs in students' essays

Motif	No. of essays mentioning the motif
fair financial remuneration	82
adequate job placement	79
work environment	75
relationships with colleagues/co-workers	75
clear organizational structure	68
quality of management	68
benefits	65
meaningful work	65
variety of work	63
job satisfaction	61
clear definition of duties and responsibilities	57
opportunity for personal growth	54
career development	54

On the other hand, students seem to neglect the corporate perspective. There is no or very little consideration of whether the company as a whole behaves ethically, whether the products and services it offers meet the expected ethical standards, stakeholder relations are hardly mentioned. In the future, from this perspective, the corporate view of ethical issues should be much more emphasized in the teaching of business ethics.

Concerning ethical aspects of communication in workplace relationships, the students emphasize the importance of correct and polite language, respect for communication partners, helpfulness, kindness, ability to listen to others, avoiding misunderstandings, paying attention to the appropriate form and content of communication, not underestimating disputes, and rejecting verbal bullying.

In contrast to the previous point, here, at least in some cases, the corporate view is present (e.g., refrain from making disloyal statements about the company, do not bring out internal information).

Regarding the topic of the code of ethics, the students consider it essential that the code is clear and understandable, that employees are encouraged to participate in its development, and that it focuses on the common interest of the company, organisation or institution. The corporate view is not neglected here, either. Moreover, the essential motif of interdisciplinary dialogue, which is widely emphasized in contemporary applied ethics (see, e.g., Shih et al., 2021; Solomonides et al., 2022; Stenseke, 2022; Hu et al., 2022; Leimanis & Palkova, 2021), is evident. Nevertheless, it is also useful to emphasize other benefits of codes of conduct. Codes of conduct help promote fair business practices, honesty and respect for others and the law. At the same time, they ensure the quality of work as well as health and safety. They help resolve conflicts and unfair practices. Codes may prevent unethical and unfair behaviour and discrimination in the workplace. They improve the company's image and credibility and also serve as a basis for redress in the event of misconduct.

On the topic of inappropriate behaviour in the workplace, students often point out the unacceptability of rude, aggressive and sexually motivated behaviour. Again, the main emphasis here is on the personal perspective, whereas the corporate perspective (e.g.,

obeying the company's rules, effective communication, taking responsibility, accountability, professionalism), is neglected.

The topic of fair trade is considered by students to be insufficiently promoted. On the other hand, not the Czech Republic nor its predecessors have ever had any colonies and the attitude of the local population towards fair trade issues is therefore different from that of people in countries that have actively participated in the exploitation of colonized parts of the world. Still, Fair Trade is becoming more well-known in the Czech Republic, especially through multinational chains that distribute fair trade products.

The ethics of persuasion is, in the students' views, associated with the need for unobtrusive, fair dealing linked to a rational justification of the benefits of the goods or services offered. Theoretically, emotional appeals can be used ethically in order to get the audience involved. On the other hand, their excessive utilization used in place of evidence and logical reasoning is unethical.

All in all, the students' essays/reflections pointed to the most serious shortcoming of the BE course taught at FIM UHK, namely the lack of emphasis on the corporate level of ethics. Our students tend to focus on viewing ethical issues from a personal perspective, i.e., from the perspective of the employee and his/her position in the workplace. There are no essays/reflections that approach ethical issues from a corporate or societal perspective. This is problematic because the development of new technologies requires exploring ethical issues from different perspectives.

4. Discussion

The fundamental questions we asked in this research were: What are the shortcomings of our approach to teaching applied ethics? What should we change in the future to prepare our students well for their managerial work?

Our findings suggest that we should focus much more on the corporate perspective of business ethics. It would also be useful to use suitable case studies to show how typical ethical issues of today can be addressed. A particularly appropriate example is the application of new technologies, which bring with them a number of new ethical challenges. These cannot be solved by individuals, as their solution requires a broad discussion between multiple stakeholders with different perspectives. Particularly useful might be to show examples of ethical problem solving that include conflicts between ethical principles, exemplified by medical ethics (e.g., Varkey, 2021). It is not a matter of completely changing the approach to teaching business ethics. Rather, it should be enriched with case studies suggesting possible solutions to real problems that not only healthcare professionals but also managers may encounter.

Of course, our study is limited because students could not choose reflecting on multiple topics. Moreover, from their perspective, writing about ethical issues from their own perspective was certainly easier than considering a variety of different approaches. On the other hand, we consider it essential that students understand that there is not only the employer's responsibility to the employee, but also a responsibility and accountability to other people, including the company's shareholders, customers, suppliers, and ultimately to the local community and society as a whole.

5. Conclusions

We dare to claim, teaching ethics to future managers is increasingly desirable. Various projects on the introduction of new technologies and other means for the potential improvement of human life contain chapters dealing with the ethical implications of such changes. From this perspective, it seems that the path we have chosen at the FIM UHK, i.e., introducing students to basic theory and then, in particular, solving case studies and students' own reflecting on tricky ethical topics, is an appropriate way to awaken and subsequently deepen their ethical awareness. The near future is likely to be much more favourable to ethical practice than the recent past.

Conflict of interest: none.

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